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LA BOITE'S HISTORY AS DOCTORAL STUDY: A RESEARCH METHODOLOGY STORY

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Abstract

How does a researcher make sense of and give scholarly shape to an Australian theatre company's seventy-eight years of history? That was my dilemma when faced with the topic I was determined to pursue as my doctoral study — the history of La Boite Theatre Company from its beginnings as a repertory society in 1925 to 2003. The following article gives insight into my quest as researcher to find the most appropriate research methodology to support such a long and varied history and to allow the key question of my study to be answered.



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Keywords: *AUSTRALIAN THEATRE HISTORY; HISTORIOGRAPHY; LA BOITE THEATRE; PROFESSIONAL THEATRE COMPANIES; AMATEUR THEATRE COMPANIES.*

Introduction

Six years ago, I decided that if I was to embark on a doctoral study that would dominate my life for the foreseeable future, then two criteria must be met: firstly, I must be deeply interested in the topic and, secondly, the resultant thesis must be useful to my community. The topic I chose — the history of Brisbane's La Boite Theatre — met both these criteria.

I knew I could easily be passionate about this history because of my personal association since 1975 as sometime actor, dedicated audience member and Board member for a three year term in the 1990s. As for its usefulness, there was never any doubt in my mind that this was a history that deserved to be told. Inspired in its genesis by the Australian Repertory movement, La Boite began operations in 1925 as the Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society (BRTS) and adhered to repertory principles as an amateur group for

fifty years before transforming itself, after a sixteen year period as a 'pro-am' theatre, into a fully professional, still flourishing company. Of the four original repertory societies that continue to exist in Adelaide, Brisbane, Canberra and Hobart¹, only La Boite can claim a still unbroken line of theatrical activity since 1925 *and* a successful transformation into a professional operation, a distinctive and unusual achievement in Australian theatre history. Additionally, La Boite is the oldest theatre company in Queensland, amateur or professional, and is currently second only to the Queensland Theatre Company in official status within this State. I felt strongly that the researching and writing of this special story would make an important contribution to the history of theatre both in Queensland and nationally.

I had also noted that, until recently, most scholarly work in the field of Australian theatre has concentrated much more on playwrights, plays and theatrical movements than on individual theatre companies. This trend is slowly changing however and in recent years interest has been focused on organisations and their key personnel as sites of research relevant to Australian theatre scholarship, most notably in Julian Meyrick's history of Nimrod — *See How it Runs: Nimrod and the New Wave* (2002) and Geoffrey Milne's *Theatre Australia (Un)limited: Australian theatre since the 1950s* (2004), a major work of enormous scope and range that examines national organisations and institutions as well as state and regional companies and bodies.

Crafting the Research Question

Now that I had my topic, what central question would I ask to give shape, coherence and focus to my study? Katharine Brisbane's writing on the role of Australian Little Theatres of the 1920s to the 1960s set me in the right direction. In her introduction to Connie Healy's *Defiance: Political theatre in Brisbane 1930-1962*, she described these amateur groups as 'the parents of our national theatre' and the force that 'pushed for a national theatre and created the climate out of which came the demand for an Australia Council' (2000:5). Brisbane noted, however, that although at this time there was a great need for '... "professionalism" in performance', most little theatres were unable or unwilling to make that transition from amateur to professional and 'by the end of the 70s most of the old-fashioned theatre groups were gone' (*ibid.*). La Boite Theatre was an exception². Not only did it make that transition but it continues to be a successful professional operation today. How did it do it? I had found my focus and my research question:

Over its long history to 2003³, how did La Boite Theatre⁴ negotiate its transformation from an amateur repertory society to an established professional company and, despite set-backs and crises, survive, change and develop in an unbroken line of theatrical activity?

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1. Adelaide, Canberra and Hobart repertory companies continue to exist as amateur companies. It should be noted that although Perth's Repertory Club, formed in 1919, evolved into the National Theatre Company in 1956, this professional operation closed in 1984 (King and Simmons, in Parsons, 1995:494). Adelaide Repertory Theatre which began in 1908 has the distinction of being the oldest still operating amateur theatre in Australia (Afford, 2004:11).
 2. In Queensland, so too, for a time, was Brisbane's Twelfth Night Theatre. Established as an amateur group in 1936, it successfully transformed into a professional company in 1971, achieving twenty years of professional theatre but unfortunately lost its funding and ceased operations in 1991.

I then came up with a title for the thesis which seemed to embrace the research problem that I had set myself — *La Boite Theatre 1925 to 2003: an Historical Survey of its Transformation from an Amateur Repertory Society to an Established Professional Company*.

Finding the Right Theoretical Perspectives

The next step in my research journey was to discover which theoretical perspectives would frame my study, what research methods would guide it. I began with an investigation into historiography and soon found myself in the murky waters of postmodernism — from which I hastily retreated, but not before taking from this 'ism' some useful informing frames of references.

Historiography or Postmodern Historiography?

Historiography, or historical research, is at its base level 'a method for discovering, from records and accounts, what happened during some past period' (Marshall and Rossman, 1999 in Berg 2001:210). However, historiography goes beyond the mere collection of information about the past — 'it is the study of the relationships among issues that have influenced the past, continue to influence the present, and will certainly affect the future' (Glass, 1989 in Berg 2001:211). What is most important and most interesting to the historiographer is the interpretation, analysis and presentation of the data. The reasons for conducting research as outlined by Berg (*ibid.*:212) seemed to me to strongly support my research problem of trying to discover how La Boite Theatre transformed from an amateur theatre to a flourishing professional company:

Specifically, historical research is conducted for one or more reasons — to uncover the unknown; to answer questions; to seek implications or relationships of events from the past and their connections with the present; to assess past activities and accomplishments of individuals, agencies, or institutions; and to aid generally in our understanding of human culture.

Berg asserts that 'historiographers view history as a field of human actions' and the important task of the historiographer is 'to reconstruct the reason for past actions' by 'identifying evidence of past human thinking' from 'valid and meaningful data' which are then interpreted 'with regard to how and why decisions and actions have occurred' (*ibid.*:219).

My original determination to design this study around the interpretative paradigm of postmodern historiography was abandoned on academic advice, proffered at my PhD Confirmation (a formal step undertaken eighteen months into my part-time doctoral

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3. I chose 2003 as the end point for this study as it was a defining moment in the company's history when it relocated from its iconic building in Hale Street, Milton to The Roundhouse in the Queensland University of Technology's Creative Industries Precinct at Kelvin Grove.
 4. La Boite Theatre began life as 'Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society', then dropped 'Society' in 1945 to become 'Brisbane Repertory Theatre'. With the opening of its first theatre-in-the-round in 1967, it often referred to itself as 'Brisbane Repertory's La Boîte Theatre'. In 1977 it began marketing itself as 'La Boîte' although it remained, legally, Brisbane Repertory Theatre. Between 1993 and 2003, its official title was 'La Boite Theatre'. Although the original French spelling — La Boîte — was used for almost fifteen years, the circumflex was abandoned from the early 1980s. On its move to Kelvin Grove, it became 'La Boite Theatre Company'.

studies). I was advised that this paradigm was too complex for a study that embraced a long and complicated theatrical history and that it would distract from the transformational journey at the centre of this study which required a chronological approach. Therefore, I was advised to pursue a more traditional historiographical paradigm which allowed for my investigation to be chronological and less complicated in its structure.

However, some elements of postmodern historiography remained attractive to this study and were blended into the traditional historiographical approach. For want of a better term, I called my interpretative framework 'a contemporary historiographical paradigm'. Iggers (1979:16) states that the postmodern critique of traditional historiography has thrown new light on historical practice:

It has not destroyed the historian's commitment to recapturing reality or his or her belief in a logic of inquiry, but it has demonstrated the complexity of both.

Feminist Theory

A profound 'complexity' that postmodern historiography offered me as the researcher was related to the effect feminist theory has had upon traditional historiography. For centuries, Western history has been a series of narratives of 'great' men and a recording of 'great' events (Elam 1997: 66-67). Under the influence of postmodern feminist thought, historians are now finding ways to write the histories of women. Scott in her book *Gender and the Politics of History* (1988) sees a feminist history as: 'not the recounting of great deeds performed by women but the exposure of the often silent and hidden operations of gender that are nonetheless present and defining forces in the organisation of most societies' (Elam in Jenkins, 1997:69).

Early archival research had revealed that there was a group of women associated with the history of La Boite Theatre whose influence was significant in shaping the Theatre's development. Within this interpretative paradigm, their place in this cultural history as 'defining forces' (*ibid.*) can be given appropriate significance. This is not to diminish the role of many significant men in the Theatre's history but rather to ensure that the women's stories are appropriately recognized.

Positivist and Subjectivist Epistemologies

Finally, I could see that the 'complexity' of postmodern historiography allowed for a blending of positivist and subjectivist epistemologies that I thought would suit my study. A positivist epistemology entails 'an objective account of the past based on thorough immersion in the empirical data and an unbiased assemblage of that data into an accurate sequence' (Friedman 1997:233). The Theatre's history between 1925 and the late 1950s in relation to the research question emerged mainly from archival research as very few key people associated with the Theatre were alive to provide any other account of those years. To at least some extent, therefore, this part of the Theatre's history has the flavour at times of an objective account.

Friedman describes the subjectivist epistemology within the context of 'the Real of history' which is 'knowable only through its written or oral textualizations' (Friedman, in Jenkins, 1997:233-234), in these terms:

The past is therefore triply mediated — first, through the mediations of those texts, which are themselves reconstructions of what 'really' happened; second, through the fragmentary and partial survival of those textualizations which are dependent upon

the politics of documentation and the luck, skill and persistence of the historian-as-detective who must locate them; and third, through the interpretative, meaning-making gaze of the historian. From this perspective, the excellence of history writing depends not upon the level of objectivity but rather upon the cogency of interpretation.

In relation to the Theatre's history from 1960, I collected many oral accounts through interviews which added texture and flavour to the archival research. It is in this part of the history in particular that the subjectivist epistemology permeated the work. Even aspects of the earlier history respond well to 'cogency of interpretation', especially in relation to contributions made by key figures such as Barbara Sisley and Professor J.J. Stable, co-founders of the Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society (BRTS), and George Landen Dann, playwright and active member of the Theatre for many years.

Micronarrative

With its emphasis on key figures, there is a sense, within my historical study, of 'micronarrative', a postmodernist term used by Burke to describe 'the telling of a story about ordinary people in their local setting' (1991: 241). Although my history falls far short of embracing the precise meaning of the term which allows for the historian's use of 'fictional techniques' to more richly 'thicken' — Geertz's term — the narrative of the 'factual' work (in Burke, 1991:240), it was useful in legitimating the cultural significance of these 'stories'.

An Historical Imagination

Overall, I understood my research is an interpretative enterprise that required, finally, an historical imagination for an interpretive 'truth' to emerge in relation to the key question. Following the poststructuralist notion that all 'texts' have the potential to convey many meanings, and that there is no one true and objective reading of these texts that will reveal the ultimate 'truth' of this history, then what this study sought was *an* interpretative truth that could exist alongside other interpretations that are also 'true' (Tuchman, 1994: 316).

Hermeneutics

The term 'hermeneutics' first appeared in the seventeenth century to mean the science of biblical interpretation and the term 'exegesis' was the actual explanation of the meaning of the biblical text (Crotty, 1998:87). Hermeneutics has now become a valuable means of 'reading' not only written texts to bring understanding but also unwritten texts such as 'human practices, human events, human situations' (*ibid.*). Fischer-Lichte, for example, employs hermeneutics as a 'theory of understanding' in relation to 'the reception of the theatrical text' i.e., performance (1992:206-217).

Although the word is relatively new, Crotty comments that a disciplined approach to interpretation characterised the way ancient Greek scholars studied literature. Their approach was to take the text as a whole rather than a series of unrelated parts: '... the relating of part to whole and whole to part ... would become an enduring theme within hermeneutics' (*ibid.*: 89). In contemporary interpretivism this notion has been formalised in the term 'hermeneutic circle' (*ibid.*:92; Fischer-Lichte, 1992:212-214). Crotty states that while 'one can satisfactorily understand the natural world simply by understanding the parts that make it up', this is not the case in the human sciences: 'To understand a text bearing upon human affairs or a culture that guides human lives, one needs to be able to

move dialectically between part and whole, in the mode of the hermeneutic circle' (*ibid.*: 92). As Fischer-Lichte explained it, 'the meanings of the individual elements and substructures of a text can be constituted only with a view to its overall meaning just as, conversely, the overall meaning can only be constituted on the basis of the meanings of the elements and substructures' (1992:213-214). This approach to text provided a useful theoretical perspective to support the interpretive exercise I was undertaking.

In the initial data-gathering process, my 'text' was the whole history of La Boite which I felt I needed to understand before I could begin to grasp the meaning and significance of the parts of this history and *vice versa*. In this process, those parts or elements which emerged as seemingly more important than others were related to artistic and organisational leadership. Thus, a second major text emerged which became the basis for the interpretive exercise of addressing the key question of this thesis — grouped into a 'whole', this new text constituted all those artistic and organisational leaders who seemed to have most influenced, both positively and negatively, La Boite's development. Now, the research enterprise was to both survey and analyse these leadership contributions in an endeavour to find what kinds of 'manifestations' of leadership might emerge to provide a meaningful response to the thesis question.

Additionally, Gadamer's introduction of the notion of 'prejudice' into hermeneutic theory threw light on the relationship between the 'interpreter' and the text (cited in Fischer-Lichte, 1992:207). Following Gadamer, Fischer-Lichte explains that these prejudices, determined by background and 'particular experiences s/he has had' can 'condition the process of understanding a text' and 'yields the respective fore-understanding with which the receiver approaches a text' (*ibid.*:208). Although I fought against a too subjective presence within this study, my own set of experiences within La Boite gave me a particular 'fore-understanding' which could shape how I understood this 'text' and its manifestations and which I could at least be alert to, if not always overcome.

Qualitative Research Methods

In broad terms, I recognised that this study could be categorised as social research within the human sciences and thus would of course employ qualitative research methods of data collection. 'Qualitative research', whilst a convenient umbrella term to describe the kind of research undertaken in this study is in fact a term that is widely acknowledged as difficult to define (Ely *et al.*, 1991:3–5). Berg attempts a clear and simple definition by comparing *qualitative research* with the term *quantitative research* — if 'quantitative research refers to counts and measures of things' then 'qualitative research properly seeks answers to questions by examining various social settings and the individuals who inhabit these settings' (Berg, 2001:2-7), a fitting description for my research project.

A major component of my research involved extensive archival data collection in the Fryer Library at the University of Queensland which holds the Brisbane Repertory Theatre Collection dating from 1925. Records in this collection include Council reports, policy documents, administrative, financial, artistic and publicity materials, newspaper articles, reviews, programs, photographs, scripts, posters and memorabilia. The Fryer Library also holds the George Landen Dann Collection and materials relating to Professor J.J. Stable, both major figures in the theatre's early history. The Performing Arts Museum of the Queensland Performing Arts Centre holds some La Boite documents from *circa*

1988 to the present and also an eclectic collection of programs, photographs and other archived material which date from the late 1920s which were useful to this study. Substantial relevant material was kindly lent to me from La Boite's own archival collection and by individuals who had small private collections. As well there was my own eclectic collection of materials gathered through my personal association with La Boite.

Crucial to the study were oral accounts, gathered through audio-taped interviews, of people who were instrumental in shaping the theatre's history or were involved in a significant way in the theatre's activities. Such people included past and present Artistic Directors, Presidents/Chairs of Councils/Boards, General Managers, Administrators, directors and actors. Of the many dozens of people who could have made a contribution to this study, a limit had to be placed on the number of interviews undertaken and decisions were made on the basis of their relative significance to the thesis question.

Archival Research

Qualitative research methods or procedures of data collection 'provide a means of accessing unquantifiable facts about people [that] researchers observe and talk to' or are 'represented by their personal traces (such as letters, photographs, newspaper accounts . . . and so on)' (Berg, 2001:7). My archival research unearthed not only the 'personal traces' of key individuals associated with La Boite's transformation from amateur to professional but also non-personal traces of an institution — Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society, Brisbane Repertory Theatre and later La Boite Theatre.

The archival documents that formed part of the data collection were a combination of primary and secondary sources. Important distinctions are made between both kinds of sources and require clear definition. Whilst admitting that the distinctions can be fuzzy, Tuchman (in Denzin and Lincoln, 1994:318) has a clear-cut demarcation, defining secondary sources as 'books and articles written by historians and social scientists about a topic' and primary sources as 'most often the historical data (documents or practices) of the period one is trying to explain'. Berg (2001) elaborates on primary sources as involving 'the oral or written testimony of eyewitnesses' which can be 'original artifacts, documents, and items related to the direct outcome of an event or an experience' and may include 'documents, photographs, diaries, journals, life histories, drawings, mementos or other relics' (*ibid.*: 214). Secondary sources he details as 'the oral or written testimony of people not immediately present at the time of a given event. They are documents written or objects created by others that relate to a specific research question or area of research interest' (*ibid.*). Both these definitions helped me to sort out which, in my particular study, were secondary sources and which were primary.

The range of secondary sources gleaned from the archives created a useful set of data that was triangulated with archival primary sources, oral accounts *via* contemporary interviews and non-archival secondary sources found in scholarly works. Archival data that incorporated both primary and secondary sources and which formed the basis for this interpretative study included:

Primary Sources

Interviews; Minutes of Annual General Meetings; Minutes of Meetings of Executive Committees; Minutes of Special General Meetings; Annual Reports by Presidents and Chairs of Council; Annual Reports by Artistic Directors; Annual Reports of

Administrators and General Managers; Financial Reports; Planning Documents; Funding Documents; Constitutions; formal and informal correspondence; theatre programs; season brochures; photographs; scrapbooks.

Secondary Sources

Newspaper articles, press clippings, theatre reviews; scholarly works including Australian theatre history texts; Australian cultural history texts; journal articles; parts of some interviews.

Interviews — Oral Accounts as Data

Oral accounts of La Boite's history were collected via interviews. These personal reminiscences of a number of key people associated with the Theatre's history comprised a significant amount of highly valued data for this study. The legitimacy of using oral data has been contested over the last several decades and is part of the on-going debate about the nature of history (Prins, 1991:127-128). Prins defines oral history simply as 'history written with evidence gathered from a living person, rather than a written document' (*ibid.*:114). She suggests that the controversy over oral sources is related to historians' traditional valuing of the written word over the spoken word which, she says, they hold in contempt (*ibid.*:116). This contempt for oral history is related to the backlash against school-based history curricula which has favoured exposing young people to many types of sources including oral and to a range of evidence on the one topic. The backlash in England under Prime Minister Thatcher resulted in a 'document-driven and parochial syllabus of British political and constitutional history, with an emphasis on rote learning of dates and 'facts' and an aversion to the historical imagination' (*ibid.*: 128).

Although my study was not an 'oral' history, personal accounts as data were of fundamental importance in responding to the research question. Twenty-two interviews contributed significantly to the richness and texture of the study providing detail, subjectivity and human presence. Prins sums it up:

What personal reminiscence can bring is a freshness and a wealth of detail which is not otherwise to be found. It makes possible small-scale group histories . . . it gives historians the means to write what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz has called 'thick description': richly textured accounts which have the depth and the contours to permit substantial anthropological analysis. (*ibid.*: 134)

Historians opposed to the use of oral accounts cite the unreliability and untrustworthiness of memory as compared to 'the inanimate and unchanging records of documents' (*ibid.*:131). However, Prins warns of documentary sources not always as 'unintentionally, unselfconsciously bequeathed to us as one might think'. In my case, while it is difficult to ascribe any sinister intent, gaps in documentary sources were evidenced in incomplete archival records of, mostly, early decades where some vital annual reports and minutes of meetings were missing, where Special General Meeting minutes had not been kept, where a few financial reports could not be located, or 'see the attached document' instructions revealed nothing attached. Of the reliability of memory, Prins says that 'tests on different types of memory tend to agree that long-term memory, especially in individuals who have entered that phase which psychologists call "life review", can be remarkably precise' (*ibid.*:133).

These oral accounts acquired through interview tested the validity and reliability of the archival data or, at least, created a tension between the primary/secondary source material and the oral histories of the interviewees. Those interviewed by me and three others whose audio interviews were made available to me, included some of the key people who were significantly involved in the theatre's history and whose collective memories spanned from the late 1950s to 2003. Three taped interviews conducted by persons other than myself and recorded prior to the commencement of this study were also valuable data, filling the gaps of those deceased or, in one case, not available to be interviewed.

Structure of the Study

Once I had the methodology under control, I set about creating a broad structure within which I could answer my key question. It seemed important that I examine how La Boite developed and progressed within each of the three different status modes of amateur, 'pro-am' and professional if I was to understand how it was able to make successful transitions from an amateur repertory group to a 'pro-am' theatre with professional administration and artistic direction during the period 1973 to 1976, and then to a fully professional company during the period 1992 to 1993, a status it has sustained to 2003, the year nominated for the end of this research project.

It was only after a full investigation of, first, the genesis of the organisation and second, the series of major changes, crises and status transitions that the company endured during the seventy-eight years of its history, that I could identify a recurring feature or characteristic that seemed to be most significant in both periods of growth and periods of crisis and retardation. It seemed that crucial to the company's capacity for survival was the artistic and organisational leadership provided throughout the decades by those people who were honorary or professional artistic directors, professional general managers and those who took voluntary positions as presidents/chairs of BRTS/BRT/La Boite Councils/Boards. Therefore, the study was shaped around key individuals within the eras they represented. Through an investigation of this characteristic of leadership, certain common recurring 'manifestations' presented themselves as particularly relevant to the company's transformation from amateur to professional status. In the end, it was these manifestations of leadership that formed the core findings from the study.

Conclusion

The contemporary approach to historiography which I adopted gave me a secure framework within which to analyse my data and outline my findings. Perhaps most importantly, the research methodology justified the significance given in this study to what otherwise might be considered a 'small' story in the whole landscape of Australia's theatrical history and allowed full weight and importance to be given to the contribution of four significant women.

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